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ABSTRACT

Including Native literature in school curricula is an important way of enhancing the Native student's self-concept and providing accurate Native cultural knowledge to Native and non-Native students alike. Nevertheless, Canadian school literature programs generally contain neither contemporary nor traditional Native literature. Some programs contain "Native literature" written by non-Natives, but the writing tends to deal with non-Natives' reactions to Native people and may create new stereotypes. Literary critics have generally overlooked the unique qualities of Native literature. One significantly different aspect is oral transmission, now eroding in the face of Western preference for the written word. In the oral tradition, words are chosen with great care, creating a terse, forceful style. This reverence for the word and the sacredness of the utterance are distinguishing characteristics of Indian literature, along with a sense of place, feeling for ritual, affirmation of the need for community, and a significantly different world view. Just as allusions to Greek mythology and the Bible pervade Western literature, Native literature is full of Indian mythological references, such as the trickster, a picaresque anti-hero. Traditional poetry requires special understanding and teaching, in that its main purpose was to trap the universal mystery in a net of magical words and thereby obtain power. Traditional poetry does not contain rhyme, synonyms, or personification, but relies on rhythm and word pairing or "dualism," features which are often lost in translation. 22 references (SV)

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# CONTENT IN NATIVE LITERATURE PROGRAMS

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Our conference theme is "Pathways to Excellence in Indian Education" and it is my belief that we cannot achieve excellence in any field without teaching reading skills. And reading consists not only of skills but also content.

Literature is generally considered an appropriate vehicle for the transmission and understanding of a culture. It is important that Native students receive instruction in a way that will enhance their self-concepts and provide accurate knowledge about themselves; it is also important that non-Native students receive the same insight into Native cultures. Literature has the power to recreate reality and it combines cognitive and affective insights in a manner that may be lacking in other disciplines. Art and music may achieve the same results, but unlike language arts, they are not a required component of every students' school day. Some form of literature is used in every reading program, and thus it is a matter of great urgency to include literature by Native writers in the school curricula.

Neither traditional nor contemporary Native literature is generally represented in school literature programs. Although a considerable body of writing by Natives exists, few books by Native authors are found in Canadian classrooms. In 1982-83, the only authorized textbook for Language Arts and English for Grades VII to XII in the province of Manitoba was I am an Indian, a book of collected works by Native writers.

This situation has improved only slightly with the revised curriculum; the novel April Raintree by Beatrice Culleton is included, as is a comparative mythology text that includes Indian myths - When the Morning Stars Sang Together by John S. Morgan. Penny Petrone's excellent First People, First Voices, a

collection of historical writing by Native people is suggested as a teacher reference.

Some attempts have been made in recent years to include what has been called "Native literature" in school curricula, but most of the writers have been non-Native. Books about Natives are found in schools and universities, some good books like Margaret Craven's I Heard the Owl Call My Name or George Ryga's The Ecstasy of Rita Joe. In other cases, the writing deals more with non-Native persons' perceptions of and reactions to Native people, like Margaret Laurence's work or Rudy Wiebe's Peace Shall Destroy Many.

Literature about Natives by non-Natives is often sympathetic and perceptive. It can perform an invaluable service in helping non-Native readers confront their feelings of ambivalence toward Native people. Yet however good this literature may be, it can further isolate and alienate Native students because they are the "third" persons, often "non-persons". Authors depict non-Native characters' lack of understanding of Native people so well that the Natives remain an enigma to the readers also.

Not only does much contemporary writing about Natives leave the character of the Indian largely untouched, it also creates new stereotypes. The Natives are portrayed from an outsider's point of view while the writer focuses on problems. Gone is Cotton Mather's image of the "forlorn and wretched Heathen" as is John Richardson's "blood-thirsty savage", Rousseau's "noble savage" and even James Fenimore Cooper's gentle children of the forest. Instead we now have the stereotype of the helpless Indian, suspended between two cultures and able to cope with neither like Margaret Laurence's Tonnerre family or the Indian people in W. O. Mitchell's Vanishing Point. While most aspects of the lives of Native

people are portrayed as problematic, strengths of the culture may be downplayed, ignored or not recognized by the writer.

Growing awareness of their own culture has been nurtured among Native students through handicrafts, art and music, but literature has not been emphasized to the same extent. Inclusion of literature has not been emphasized to the same extent. Inclusion of literature by Native writers would likely not only enhance the self-concept of Native students, but also create a greater interest in literature courses per se.

I teach two literature courses under the Native Studies umbrella at Brandon University - Oral Narratives, a course on mythology and traditional poetry and Native Literature, a course on contemporary writing. It is only in a Native Studies program that Native literature is recognized at all, since even a Canadian literature survey course does not include anything written by a Native person. It is not surprising that students often enter my courses with a great deal of skepticism; is there such a thing as Native literature?

Paula Gunn Allen, a Native critic, points out in "The Sacred Hoop; A Contemporary Perspective" that although literature is only one facet of a culture it is largely through literature and art that the assumptions underlying a culture are understood. She goes on to say,

> A person who was raised in a given culture has no problems seeing the relevance, the level of complexity, or the symbolic significance of a culture's literature.[1]

The significance of a literature can best be understood in terms of the culture from which it springs. It is of considerable importance to readers to have access to literature that will enable them to understand and accept the principles upon which the values and traditions of their culture are based.

The importance of including literature by Native writers not only for Native students, but for all students comes from the cultural riches it contains as Natives tell their own stories. This literature reveals the depth and status of the culture; Native wisdom is indeed of value. It provides a meaningful experience in reading for Native students because it expresses familiar points of view. The oral narratives, values, beliefs and traditions are recorded and their particular brand of humor and figures of speech are present. Native literature emphasizes communal living; ancestors wait to teach Indian ways to the young who may be floundering in an alien culture or questioning traditional ways.

It is important for all people because it provides a new experience in reading as new points of view are expressed. An article by Keiichi Hirano in the journal Canadian Literature (1962) expressed a commonly-held point of view, namely that Native folklore is "neither profound nor rich". He believed that Indians "lacked the wherewithal to withstand the onslaught of white man's civilization", and arrived at the conclusion that:

> One must admit Indian culture offers no alternatives (much less challenge) to Western civilization in the way the Arabic, Hebrew or Far Eastern civilizations do. It is simply not of that calibre.

He continues,

> the state (or level) of the Indian world view (or thought pattern) being what it is, we cannot expect it to make any strong impact on Canadian literature. It cannot reorientate or add new dimensions to the existing and prevalent thought patterns.[2]

This attitude toward Indian literature is rarely expressed as bluntly as in Hirano's statement. However, the belief that there is no depth to mythology from minority cultures and that these cultures were all but destroyed because they lacked the spiritual and cultural strength is a convenient explanation used by colonizers in all parts of the world.

Hirano is perhaps correct when he says that Indian literature is not a challenge to Western civilization but he does not recognize that it can, indeed, offer an alternative way of thinking and that it can add a new dimension to existing thought patterns. To recognize a different kind of literature does not in any way diminish literature from Western civilization; this is not a competition and should not be thought of in terms of one literature "challenging" another.

The task ahead of us, in working toward an acceptance of Native literature in Canadian education systems is to provide a new and different criticism. Historically it was ethnologists and anthropologists, rather than scholars of literature, who described Native literature and showed an interest in preserving it. Yet it is not they but literary critics who currently comment on literary works by Native writers. And critics often apply criteria from the dominant culture while overlooking the unique qualities of Native literature.

We need a new theory of criticism, or at least new perceptions of existing critical theory as applied to Native American writers. What we do now as teachers and critics will largely determine what Native writers will be able to do or get credit for in the future.

Before Native literature can be appreciated for its unique qualities there needs to be an examination of underlying cultural beliefs. This is a forbidding task for the unknowledgeable person and so may deter many from attempting to teach the literature. But if some less threatening aspects are understood, the cultural assumptions can be learned as the literature is studied. The reader unfamiliar with the culture may not always recognize the strength and beauty of the literature but can recognize common themes. The Native reader may find an

unprecedented source of strength in the literature, an avenue for personal development that has not as yet been utilized to its fullest potential.

One significantly different aspect of the literature is that except for some Mayan and Aztec works, it was transmitted orally; it is only since the coming of European civilizations that it has been recorded. So Native literature is still comparatively close to oral forms. There is a long-standing preference in our society for written literature - written "anything" - a preference which has come about partly because there has been little exposure to oral narrative and also because of the permanence of the written word.

Oral tradition often dies when published texts are spread among artists. The shift from oral composition to the reproduction of fixed texts erodes memory. The technique of memorization is a skill entirely different from performing oral narrative and because memorization stunts the ability of the artist to compose orally, the art is usually lost. It is not inevitable, however, that a literary tradition will automatically destroy the oral tradition. The two can exist side by side, as is demonstrated by Native cultures that have made a point of keeping their oral traditions alive. Our system of Western thought and education, however, has largely chosen to ignore this possibility.

The skill of Native people in telling myths and legends is unparalleled in any other Canadian group. I rarely meet a student who cannot tell a legend with enthusiasm and competence, whether it be an old legend handed down from generation to generation, or a "new" legend about contemporary times. Country and western music is very popular in the north. Hank Snow's song, "Your Cheating Heart" is heard on every radio station. I have heard various versions of a story at Cross Lake, Manitoba about a contest between Jak-a-pes and a Windigo. The Windigo won and the trickster, always the poor loser, is still complaining about

the unfair tactics of the Windigo and his wailing of "Your Cheating Heart" can be heard all over the north.

In order to fully appreciate Native literature the reader must recognize the difference between oral and written literature. Oral literature is a special performance; it is unique. It is one moment of a tradition. Even when it is written down and becomes "fixed" it was still oral. Although contemporary Native writers use Western forms for self-expression, much of their literary experience was oral, influencing style, form and theme.

In the oral tradition there is a great economy of words; the words are chosen with great care. There is little description since the author assumes the listener shares his knowledge of environment and reasons behind actions. Even moments of great emotion are described without much intensity of language; emotional pitch is described obliquely rather than directly. Such an understatement is not an indication of repression or absence of emotion, but it is evident that the narrator simply takes the emotion for granted and that events speak for themselves, dramatically and emotionally. This can result in a terse, forceful style as is shown by Maria Campbell , in Halfbreed, when she tells of the life of her grandmother.

> She brushed and cleared the settlers' land, picked their stones, delivered their babies, and looked after them when they were sick. Her home was always open to anyone in the community who cared to drop in, but in the forty years she lived there no white person ever visited her home, and only three old Swedes came when we buried her.[3]

This same terse style is found in The Days of Augusta as Augusta Tappage tells about the hurt and resentment towards an unfeeling welfare bureaucracy when it removed a foster child from her home.

They took one on me, the Welfare did.
They put him out at Horsefly
You see, this one I had was a likeable little fellow,
but he started taking fits.

Well, that woman came for him.
In a way I was kind of sorry
and I was kind of mad at that woman too.
I hated her. I told her,
"What makes you so important now?
The minute I raise him
you come taking him away!"

I didn't want him to go.
But I guess she had orders from people.
You know how everything goes in
government offices.

I guess I loved him, that little fellow.[4]

The love for the child is simply expressed in the last line, emphasizing the painful parting described earlier. However, not only unhappiness is expressed with a minimum of words; joy and contentment can be conveyed in the same fashion. Tom Boulanger, in An Indian Remembers says of his marriage:

> I was married in 1925 in Beren's River. I had a very wonderful time having a partner in trapping, always going with me very year.[5]

The oral narrative style is only one aspect of Native literature. Another aspect to remember is the basis of all literature, namely myth and legend. Literature from Western cultures is strongly influenced by allusions to Old World mythologies, especially Greek mythology and the Bible. Neither are found in Native literature, yet mythological references abound, so it is important to have some understanding of Indian mythology. Most pervasive in Native mythology is the trickster, one of the oldest expressions of humanity. Paul Radin, in his book The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology says the trickster can only be understood if he is viewed as a psychological problem.[6]

The trickster is superior to man because of his superhuman qualities, but inferior because of his unreason and unconsciousness. He is no match for animals either because of his clumsiness and lack of instinct. He is impulsive, has no values, has passionate appetites for women and food, yet it is through his actions that values come into being. He violates all accepted human values, repeatedly comes to grief but accidentally creates good. He does not participate in group activities but is a picaresque hero, that is, a lovable traveling rogue wandering from place to place. Yet "hero" is the wrong term for him because of his many unfortunes; anti-hero is more suitable. Only too often there is nothing heroic about his predicaments. Laughter and irony, that is, the unexpected part of most of the stories about the trickster.

Trickster-like characters are common in Native literature, especially in contemporary poetry. The most noteworthy of this type are the works of James Welch - Winter in the Blood, The Death of Jim Loney and Riding the Earthboy 40. His heros are always anti-heros; the humor is rich and sardonic. In Winter in the Blood the hero does not even have a name!

Paula Gunn Allen's work, especially Literature of the American Indian is most useful in identifying some differences between Native writing and Western literature. She points out that the Indian writer stands with one foot in each of two literary traditions. The Indian tradition can be identified as such by the reverence for words, the sense of place and a dependence on that sense, the feeling for ritual, the affirmation of the need for community and the significantly different world view.[7] Although these concepts are interrelated and do not function as individual entities, they can be identified as the key components of contemporary Native literature and are criteria upon which any valid criticism should be based.

In the traditional Indian world view the word is considered sacred. It creates. The speaker is not the center of the universe because words were on earth before man. This idea is no different from the New Testament where St. John says "In the beginning was the word." The good story-teller does not create words to relay his story, rather he discovers words which have already created a story. Silences between words are as full of meaning and as sacred as the words themselves; what is not said is as important as what is said. A figure of speech called synecdoche is often found, that is, the use of the part for the whole, like my meat for the wild animals or my wheels for my car. Though the careful selection of words is by no means confined to Native writers, the reverence for the word and the sacredness of the utterance places the traditional Indian composer in a position unparalleled in Western society.

Precision of detail is a distinguishing characteristic of all Native writing and results in a unique and vibrant imagery in both prose and poetry. This perception of the word is likely the most important unifying factor. But the word does not stand by itself; it has meaning only if it is linked to the land. Indian literature cannot be defined as apart from the land. Paula Gunn Allen has said, "We are the land."[8] The land is a reality in the physical sense; but beyond that, the land functions as a moral idea; a starting place and a unifying force. Sense of place is not unique to American Indian literature, but American Indian literature is uniquely dependent upon the land. It is only in Native myths that an unselfconscious identity of man and land is taken for granted. The place does not restrict the Indian writer, rather it broadens the ability to imagine and create.

Land is related to memories and chants. It is a recognition that contemporary literature is not entirely new, that it has a relationship with the

past, with oral tradition. Leslie Silko's writing is an example of how oral tradition can be used in contemporary works. In her writing, the old stories are found in the new stories; her novel Ceremony and her short story "Yellow Woman" in A Man to Send Rain Clouds demonstrate how this can be.

Much of the oral literature was never perceived as apart from religion, morality and ethics of the community. It is this relationship between the word, the land, and the ceremony linked with the past that gives strength to truly Native contemporary literature. Writers confirm the existence and the need for a sense of community as it currently exists among Native people. Ceremony and ritual can only live if there is a community for it to function within. Maria Campbell, in Halfbreed writes of a happy childhood but when community supports and rituals are no longer there her life falls into chaos. She returns to her community and her past to regain her strength. George Kenny speaks of loss of community in Indians Don't Cry and Beatrice Culleton in In Search of April Raintree shows how lack of community and roots led to April's search. Community is seen as an integral part of an Indian determination for survival; rugged individualism is not characteristic of Indian literature.

Poetry seems to be a dominant genre of contemporary Native writers. This could well be because in poetry the creative writer can more readily approach the style of oral narrative. In many cases the styles are the same as those of other American poets, but the subject matter is usually Indian in nature. Allusions are personal rather than cultural, organization is associational rather than logical and the approach is often surrealistic. This surrealism should come as no surprise because it corresponds closely to the dreams and visions associated with the vision quest. The reading of the poetry is enhanced if a different

world view is recognized, even if it is not wholly understood. The poetry is often difficult and obscure, as is much of that written by non-Natives.

Traditional poetry, however, requires some special understanding and teaching. It differs markedly from English poetry both in form and function. The religious and artistic preoccupation of much of the Indian world went far beyond anything in the European experience at the time when the two cultures met. The poetry was functional, an integral part of everyday life. Myths and tales were educational tools that taught the younger generation the beliefs and history of the tribes, but poetry was a means to obtain power over invisible life forces. The main purpose was to trap the universal mystery in a net of magical words and thus gain control over the positive creative forces in the world. Tribal members believed they needed this control in order to achieve anything beyond individual human strength.

As with myth and legend, allusions to Christianity and European mythology are not found. The ceremonial pattern that includes the four world directions, which are analogous to the four planes of the human body, creates repetition and pairings. Repetition is one of the outstanding characteristics of the poetry but is not always evident in translation. In print a one-line song may appear, which in traditional times was a complete performance with repetition, refrain and vocables. Rhyme in European poetry creates a sense of completeness; rhyme is not found in traditional Native poetry but completeness is achieved through rhyming perceptions, moods and natural objects. Words are paired like "light" and "dark", or "Father Sky" and "Mother Earth". Related to pairing is a device called "dualism" as in the Navaho NIght Chant when "He-rain" and "She-rain" are described. These life-giving rains ultimately combine to produce "Child-rain".[9] Parallel ideas also resulted from the four world quarters. The rhythm was the

most important aspect of the poetry, but much of this, too, has been lost in translation.

Magic words are used as incantations in the poetry, not as assertions of survival or bravery. Much Indian poetry can be categorized as coercive or incantatory. A sentence like "The blue corn, with this it grows" may appear to be mainly descriptive but it is in fact, a coercive utterance, spoken to bring about desired action.

Other literary devices, besides rhyme and Biblical and mythical allusions are also not found in traditional Native poetry. Use of synonyms is extremely rare since meaning is usually very precise; one word can invoke a whole image. Personification also is not found since all animate and inanimate objects are thought to have an equally important position in the harmony of the universe.

Though there are significant differences between Indian poetry and the poetry from Western culture, there are also many similarities. If the main areas of difference are recognized, the study of traditional poetry can be incorporated into the courses of study and can become a rewarding experience for all students. One does not need to be a scholar of Indian culture or literature to appreciate this poignant death song from the Ojibway:

Song of a Man About to Die

If I die here
In a strange land,
If I die
In a land not my own,
Nevertheless, the thunder
The rolling thunder
Will take me home.
If I die here, the wind,
The wind rushing over the prairie
The wind will take me home.

The wind and the thunder,
They are the same everywhere,
What does it matter, then,
If I die in a strange land?[10]

I have emphasized the importance of Native culture, but I would like to point out that Native writers cannot be defined by ethnography alone. Where everything is accounted for on the basis of the culture the imaginative freedom of the writer is denied. There has to be an artistic identity beyond ethnography. There must be a recognition of how each writer adapts the Western literary forms and language to the writer's particular vision as a Native writer in society. The work may not represent traditional literature so there has to be a recognition of change. The changing of a ritual can be viewed as an "adding to", not as a loss. Too often the "adding to" is seen in terms of the cultural group only, whereas in reality the process enhances not only the culture group but mainstream society as well.

By including Native literature in our courses of study, we can capture what we have never had in traditionally limited courses, the richness of another culture. Not only will students read new forms of expression but avenues, hitherto unexplored, will be opened for their own creative endeavors.

NOTES

[1]Paula Gunn Allen, "The Sacred Hoop: A Contemporary Perspective in American Indian Literature" in Studies in American Indian Literature (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1983), p. 3.

[2]Keiichi Hirano, "The Aboriginal in Canadian Literature", Canadian Literature, Nov. 14. (1962), pp. 50-52.

[3]Maria Campbell, Halfbreed (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1973), p. 17.

[4]Jean E. Speare, The Days of Augusta (Vancouver: J. J. Douglas Ltd., 1973), p. 53.

[5]Tom Boulanger, An Indian Remembers (Winnipeg: Peguis Publishers, 1971), p. 11.

[6]Paul Radin, The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), p. 195-211.

[7]Allen, p.

[8]Paula Gunn Allen, "The Psychological Landscape of Ceremony", American Indian Quarterly, 5, No. 1 (1979), p. 7.

[9]John Bierhorst, ed. Four Masterworks of American Indian Literature (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1974), pp. 291-332.

[10]John Robert Colombo, Songs of the Indians I, (Ottawa: Oberon, 1983), p. 48.

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